

Interview with Katherine Verdery

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Introduction

Katherine Verdery is the Julien J. Studley Faculty Scholar and a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Since 1973, she has conducted field research in Romania, initially emphasizing the political economy of social inequality, ethnic relations, and nationalism. With the changes of 1989, her work shifted to problems of the transformation of formerly socialist systems, specifically regarding changing property relations in agriculture. From 1993 to 2000, she conducted fieldwork on this subject in a Transylvanian community; the resulting book, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*, was published by Cornell University Press (2003). She then completed a large collaborative project with Gail Kligman (UCLA) and a number of Romanian scholars on the opposite process: the formation of collective and state farms in Romania during the 1950's. The resulting book, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962*, was published by Princeton University Press (2011).

Professor Verdery's teaching interests include contemporary and socialist Eastern Europe, and the anthropology of property, time and space. Her most recent project takes off from her Secret Police file, which she received from the Romanian government in 2008. Using it, she has written her field memoirs from the vantage point of the police who followed her. The book will be published in 2018 under the title *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*.

Family Background and Education

YH: Where are you from?

KV: I was born in Bangor, Maine in the US but my parents moved from there when I was six months old, so it's not home for me.

YH: How did your parents influence your academic life? Who had the biggest impact on your personality and career choice?

KV: When I was born, my father was working for a company called Goodyear Tire which made and distributed tires. Then he went to work for a subsidiary of theirs, where he was basically a salesman/junior-executive, but he didn't like that. He had majored in music in college and he liked to play football, so he had initially arranged a job for himself teaching in a private boys' school, and that's what he should have done. He ended up as a real estate agent in Massachusetts; that's what he did until he died. My mother didn't finish college initially: she went to Radcliffe College for two and a half years but then dropped out to get married. When she was older (I was 8-9 years old), she went to college again to complete her BA and later became an elementary school teacher. She did that for maybe 10 or 15 years and then decided that she really wanted to stay at home and so she ended up as a housewife.

YH: Do you think that your mother or father had a greater impact on your future academic orientation, or do you think academia was just your personal decision?

KV: Well, my mother's father was a college professor so she was always very respectful of that, and she placed a lot of importance on the intellectual life even though she herself had not chosen it. She was always reading books, a lot of nonfiction. So when I started being a good student, both of them encouraged me to keep that up and then go to college, and after that to graduate school if that's what I wanted to do. But my mother's contribution was actually much more concrete because when she went back to school to finish her college degree, she had to take a distribution requirement in social sciences and she picked the introduction to anthropology. She loved it and she was always talking about these interesting things. She was learning and telling us all kinds of things and so I decided that I really wanted to find out more about this subject, so I took anthropology my first year in college and I never stopped.

YH: So your mother had greater impact for the future?

KV: Correct, but my father was very appreciative of my interest in continuing in the academy as well. I mean he was not really a business man; he had artistic and intellectual interests.

YH: How was the environment where you grew up in terms of diversity, politics, and culture? Did your political and social environment make you think about society?

KV: I don't think I thought too much about that at the time but I was impacted by my mother not being born in the US: she was a British citizen, born in Trinidad. My family moved quite a bit—that's another characteristic of anthropologists—so you have to keep getting used to new people and you often don't get attached to one specific place. So those were important contributions towards my future.

YH: As far as your education, which part had the most crucial impact for your future as an anthropologist?

KV: When I was finishing high school, I had a teacher who talked about this Reed College, which was a very progressive place without fraternities, sororities or a football team—I thought all of that stuff was pretty superficial. So, I decided to apply there and it turned out that they had a good anthropology major with three really good professors. And so I did my major and took some courses in sociology as well (I applied to other schools but Reed was the one that I was most interested in because it was just quirky and I thought it would be interesting.) Then in my junior year, I was pretty much thinking that I wanted to become a psychiatric social worker or a counsellor. I had an aunt who did this kind of work and I thought that maybe I could do that. My anthropology and sociology professors, however, were saying that I was good at this stuff and I shouldn't waste my time with social work but instead should go to graduate school. I never had intended to go to graduate school initially. I just sort of stumbled upon it through the encouragement of these professors. I didn't have any better ideas, so I applied to graduate schools and got into several and decided to just keep going and see where it leads. I think my intellectual formation was almost solely in graduate school as I didn't take the direction suggested by any of my undergraduate teachers but found my own way. One professor who was very influential on me was G. William Skinner, who worked in China. In my first year, I had a core course with him which helped me decide that I wanted to think about politics in settings outside of the US. I've essentially been conducting political anthropology. I was also influenced by professor Jane Collier who had just moved from graduate school into her first job at Stanford. She was and still is a brilliant thinker; I had many conversations with her. Those two were the biggest influences on me.

YH: Pertaining to your PhD work, how did you first become interested in Romania?

KV: When I look back on myself in graduate school, I really didn't know what I was doing much of the time. I had spent a summer traveling around in Wales and Scotland with some money that I got from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and they seemed like interesting places. Then I spent a summer doing research in Greece on an island out in the Aegean Sea. It also seemed very interesting, but what I preferred about Scotland and Wales was the feeling of their being marginal to powerful political and economic centers in Europe. Based on this, I figured I would go to the side of Europe between Western Europe and the Soviet Union, but I didn't really have a specific project that I wanted to work on. I just wanted to go somewhere less travelled and see what I could figure out. I had a colleague in graduate school who came into my office one day with a big map of Eastern Europe; we sat there looking at all these place names and trying to figure out how to pronounce them and wondering what was going on over there. Somehow, I developed an affinity for these places and decided that I would go there. I picked Romania solely because it was the only country that was actively welcoming to anthropologists at the time as the other east European countries—some of which were having internal problems, and some of which were much more closely aligned with the Soviet Union—didn't want Americans coming in and seeing what they were up to. Romania, however, said that anthropologists were welcome. The Romanian government and scholars thought that Americans would come and prove that Romanians settled in that space since time immemorial, disputing Hungarian territorial claims .

Anthropology and Sociology

YH: What do you think about the relationship between anthropology and sociology in the United States?

KV: Well, I have a problem with that because my first course in anthropology was a combined course, an introduction to anthropology and sociology, and when people were lecturing, I didn't always differentiate which field they were covering. I have always had a kind of sociological approach to anthropology, and that, I think, contributed to my relatively bad field work initially—I just wasn't all that effective at asking people questions. But what I most appreciated in sociology was the capacity for a broad sweep in thinking about history. Two sociologists whom I greatly admire, Norbert Elias and Charles Tilly, do this particularly well. I think few anthropologists have that besides them or Eric Wolf, but for sociologists, that's a part of their stock-in-trade. I think qualitative sociology has been getting more attention than the method of questionnaires, which I really have very little patience for. I don't think that kind of survey research tells you very much. Generally I have thought of the principal difference between anthropology and sociology as being a difference between capital-intensive and labor-intensive research. When you conduct a sociological survey; you have to pay more people— research assistants and so on. If you are an anthropologist, you get out there and talk to people, but it's time-consuming. The original difference was that most anthropologists worked primarily in the third world and sociologists in the first, though that has changed.

YH: In my research, I've found that globalization and modernization have greatly impacted anthropology. For example, some anthropologists choose to do fieldwork in cities on urban anthropology or other more specific topics and some sociologists now travel to remote areas to do fieldwork. Do you think the relation between anthropology and sociology should be very close, or that should each try to find its own specificity or arena?

KV: A very old friend of mine is a sociologist named Andrew Abbott, who is now teaching at the University of Chicago, and he has a book called *Chaos of Disciplines* (2001) in which he talks about interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity. He has a great deal to say in connection with questions about disciplinary identity and interdisciplinary cooperation. But the most basic notion is that in order to have interdisciplinarity, you have to have disciplines, and that having people come together with different orientations to the world is useful and productive but nonetheless requires specific disciplinary training in order to be effective. Not everybody would agree with that but I thought it was an interesting perspective.

YH: Regarding methodology: most anthropologists conduct research using qualitative methods and sociologists using quantitative methods: how do you think about the two methodologies and interactions?

KV I think some combination is good. I always find that it's helpful to frame my problem into a larger context, and that usually involves references to work in sociology and political science and to some form of quantitative results. On the whole, I think that the more useful kind of research product is one that develops a sense of how a specific social process or set of processes work themselves out in a specific setting or group of nested settings.

Fieldwork and Academic research

YH: During your academic life you have been to Romania many times: do you think there are some differences when you go back to the field each time? Tell me your feelings about revisiting your fieldwork.

KV: The person who's done the longest fieldwork in anthropology is Elizabeth Colson, who consistently traveled back and forth for 60 years or so to certain places in Africa. I made a number of friends in my first years of fieldwork and they seemed to be interested in my friendship and so, I would always be very happy to see those friends and to develop more friendships. In this village, everybody basically knew who I was and most of them would be welcoming if I showed up on the doorstep wanting to talk. In successive projects, I narrowed my circle of people but had nonetheless maintained long term relationships with people by the time I started working on property restitution. It seems to me that this was a great asset not to be squandered. I like these people and I was able to do more sophisticated work with them because they had given up trying to push me aside or tell falsehoods and so on.

YH: During this kind of fieldwork, you must have encountered some challenges. How did you strive to be a part of the community where you worked?

KV: I never thought I was *just* like them, but I certainly tried to narrow the boundaries separating us. The biggest challenge was one that I wasn't even aware of at the time: the presence of secret police surveillance, which I may have assumed was there but preferred not to dwell on. The rumour circulated that I was really a spy, and several years later when I returned for a longer visit, people would mention the secret police following me, or something of that nature. In 2006, at the suggestion of a Romanian scholar, I applied to see my secret police file from the communist period and was granted permission. It's huge, almost three thousand pages, so I read through it and then considered challenges to my fieldwork that I hadn't understood at the time. For instance, I had never realized how closely they were following me or how much they were interfering with my friends. Thus, in retrospect, that posed a major obstacle for my continuing to feel this sort of warm and fuzzy feeling towards

Romania and my Romanian friends when it turns out that a number of them were reporting on me as informers. But I think aside from that challenge, the most significant one - if I take a view from a distance- was that when I started out, I was mostly interested in theory and only scarcely interested in data. I was interested in world systems theory, in central place theory. Thus there was always some kind of theory driving my research interests. But after the 1989 revolution in Romania, I felt as if I had lost my tools because I had been developing an analysis centered around socialism. I thought that the best thing I could do would be to go back and study whatever was relevant to people on the ground and to not worry about theoretical relevance. My research improved because people were genuinely excited about what I wanted to discuss with them. Letting myself be driven by my environment rather than by a theoretical agenda was really positive for my work.

YH: I've noticed that you have published a lot of articles and books, most of them related to Romania. Which book is the most important for you, and what's the most important finding from your research?

KV: I think my best book is *The Vanishing Hectare* (2003), which is about property restitution after socialism in a Romanian village where I had previously worked. The fact that I had known people there for a long time helped me a lot with that book. I was much better at doing ethnography; I thought of interesting ways to approach problems, and I think it was partly because I went there with relatively few theoretical blinders to govern my research and instead got into talking to people about what was happening. I think that book is an important contribution to the anthropological study of property and to the study of the privatization of socialist property. When the book came out, this was not a widely covered subject, especially not in the countryside. I don't think in terms of "findings" there was so much, but I suppose if I had to just distill it into a short sentence, the most important lesson that I try to present was that all of the economists and politicians attempting to create private property were working with an ideological notion of property and hadn't a clue how to actually create private property. They thought that you could just create private rights and then have private property. What I found in my discussions was that having formal rights as property owners was practically useless if the government wasn't also making it possible for them to cultivate the land that they had received: they needed to have subsidies and agricultural credits, and they weren't being given either of those in any substantial measure. Without those, working the land wasn't meaningful to them. For them, the idea of a meaningful relationship to the land was a relationship of what they call mastery—that one can organize production on their own field, that they can receive the inputs that are necessary for it, and that they can produce a result that is worthy—and everybody was having a lot of trouble doing that. So for them, that meant that private ownership was relatively problematic. It wasn't what they were expecting.

YH: Did you conduct any comparative research between Romania and, for example, China?

KV: I've always just gone back to Romania, but I did read some things about China. I was interested in China because of Bill Skinner, a sinologist, who was one of my main influences. He wrote these fantastic articles about social structure and marketing in rural China that I found really fascinating. But I generally feel that you have to be able to speak the language well; I speak Romanian very well but I wasn't going to start over again on Chinese. I did try to learn some Hungarian with an idea of going to Hungary but then I decided not to. At the end of the 1980's, I had written a second book about Romanian national ideology, and it was pretty clear to me that it was not going to go over well with the authorities. So at that point I was considering where else I could go if I wasn't able to come back here. I was thinking about

the Moldovan Republic in the USSR, where I would have the basis for the language and the basis for comparison with a completely different state form. But, with the end of the Romanian regime, I didn't do that.

YH: So, language has been very important for your fieldwork? What do you think about multi-sited fieldwork?

KV: I think linguistic competence is important and if you arrive already endowed with several languages, or manage to pick them up, you can do very interesting comparative work. In general, I think comparative work is useful; it's very important in helping us understand how something takes certain forms and not other forms. But I'm not really a fan of multi-sited ethnography that goes from one place to another, flitting here and there and settling down only for a few weeks and doing your questions with people wherever they happen to be. I think you have to spend a lot of time in one place to be able to say anything meaningful about it. In that sense, I tend to be a bit skeptical.

YH: I know that Bronislaw Malinowski has been a major influences on your work. How do you think about his contributions and controversy about him?

KV: When I first studied Malinowski, I was really bored. And when I read *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (2014), I was concerned by its length, and I never imagined that I would be making any significant use of him in my life. But when I came to do this property book, I began teaching *Coral Gardens And Their Magic* (1978) and I became a big fan. I just suddenly realized how extraordinary brilliant he was (he was certainly very brilliant in *Argonauts* as well but I wasn't interested at the time). I even have a quote from Malinowski in the *The Vanishing Hectare* (2003), and would never have expected that earlier in my life. I think he was a very complicated person, as many of us are, and there were lots of ways in which he could have benefitted from a shrink. But he seems to have had a tremendous vital energy, which must have been appealing in some way to a number of the people he met in the Trobriand Islands, because he got such extraordinary material in such abundance and he was able to use this material in a remarkable way.

YH: Before his sudden death of a heart attack, he wanted do fieldwork in Mexico.

KV: Yes. This was the second time that he had been displaced by world war. He had come here to be a visiting professor and wasn't planning on staying in the US, as I understand it, but he couldn't go back, so naturally, it was very hard on him.

YH: What do you think about the publication of *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989)?

KV: It was in 1967 and I was not yet in graduate school when that happened—I was barely in college. We didn't really talk about it in my college training. I was in graduate school from 1970 to 1977. It came up in our theory course, and the professor said any kind of fieldwork is extraordinarily draining on the fieldworker, especially when you are the first in a place where you don't have language and you don't know anybody and you're trying to make a space for yourself. You really don't understand yet that some people lose their composure and say nasty things about the locals. I certainly had my times of feeling extremely off-put in my excursions in Romania. So my particular graduate training didn't place much emphasis on Malinowski's diary.

YH: Many critics of Malinowski accuse him of lacking consideration for history. What do you think is the importance of history in anthropology?

KV: All of my major monographs are a combination of history and anthropology. Initially, I was mostly using history as a means of understanding the forces that shaped the situation that I was examining in the field, and that is an important way to consider it. But I also think that learning something about historical methodology helps one think more deeply about field work as a method. I think that anthropology and history should work in conjunction, and I have tried to make that my practice.

YH: You have been teaching for many years. What do you think about the change in the academic training and the academic environment for anthropology? Do you think there are significant changes in students' training and in fieldwork methodology?

KV: I've never taught courses on anthropological methodology, but when I was a graduate student we had no course like that. There was no course in field methods and I think that was a big mistake, so our program here tries to help students develop tools for understanding ethnographic methodology with a variety of courses. The program at Michigan had something similar. At Johns Hopkins, where I worked before, we didn't really have a field methods course either. I think it's important to undertake some degree of philosophical questioning of the nature of the knowledge that anthropological field work can produce, so that should be part of their training as well. Interviewing as a style of work is not all that easy. I often will get emails from prospective students or somebody from another university saying 'I'm going to Romania next month and I want to do some work with the Gypsies, can you give me some ideas about how to do that?' And I often don't write back at all, because I don't see why I should be writing them a field manual. But it is also difficult to learn how to conduct interviews. I'm still not a great interviewer but it's really difficult. Some people think that you can just interview without considering power relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee or whether the interviewer is pushing an agenda more so than hearing what the interviewee wants to say. It's very important to reflect on these kinds of methods in an extended way and through course work.

YH: Some Chinese anthropologists put their personal fieldwork stories together into a book to talk about culture shock. Were there some impressive stories in your fieldwork?

KV: Well it's very difficult for an American to go do research in the third world just as it is for a person who is Han Chinese to go and work with minorities in China. I remember becoming friends with a peasant woman in the village I was working in. I used to stop by her house now and then just to say hi and to see what she was up to. One time I went there and her sister-in-law was putting cups on her back. I didn't know what this was; her back was exposed and the sister-in-law would take a stick with cotton at the end of it, dip it in some alcohol, light it on fire, and then run the stick around on the inside of a cup and place it on my friend's back. I could see that this was producing huge bruises underneath the cups and I thought, 'Oh my God, this is so unbelievable!' But the two told me that this was part of a tradition. I think about that often as an example of how perspective can assume positions of superiority and judgement. Whilst I may have assumed myself to be "civilized" in a Western sense, I knew perfectly well that American society could be criticized for a great deal also. Feelings of superiority can be reinforced in field contexts like my own, in which the people that you are working with also see city intellectuals as in some sense their social superiors. I was once working on a project regarding the role and interpretation of Romanian history in some Romanian villages and asked

them to tell me about specific historical figures. One finally responded: "Why are you asking me that question? You should be going to the school teacher." I realized that I had better change my style to contextualize my lack of Romanian schooling and knowledge of history, and then point to contemporary examples of historical names being used on television, in books, and more. I would use this basis to justify why I was asking my questions and I then had very good interviews. I had eroded ideas of social status by proving that I required their expertise and thus the style of work changed drastically. I learned an important lesson by making that shift.

YH: In the villages or small communities, people seem to like talking and gossiping. Did you hear gossip in your field work? How do you rate the importance of using gossip for anthropological study?

KV: Gossip is one of the great boons that anthropologists have for collecting information; lots of people really love to gossip. I always regarded it as a way of learning the types of subjects with which I could start a conversation. For example, regarding the history project I previously mentioned, I went to a different village than I had previously and I didn't know many people. I would sit in my landlady's kitchen every morning while her neighbor came by to purchase milk and more. I would listen to their conversations and occasionally contribute a thought or a question but I would mainly listen for starting points for other conversations. Whether you can count on gossip as fact is a different question, but as a methodological tool, I think it's crucial.

YH: After fieldwork we must decide how to explain our findings in writing. There is a book titled "*Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*" (2010) which discusses interdisciplinary ethnographic writings. Referencing this work, we have many different styles for producing ethnographies: poems; stories, novels; or traditional ethnographic works. How do you think about the diversity of the writing culture of anthropology based in your personal experiences?

KV: Well the only thing that I have ever written besides ethnographies was a memoir that is coming out from Duke University Press this year, and I found it was much harder to write than my regular books. I tend to think that it's important to include something about yourself as the researcher and your experience to help the reader understand how your position in relationship to the research subjects. But I don't have a whole lot of patience with people who write primarily from their own experience without contextualizing their research outside of their own background; I prefer a style that's blends traditional writing with some personal touch.

YH: What's your main focus now and what are your publication plans for the future?

KV: Right now, I've completed a memoir and just this morning I was talking with two colleagues about writing either a small book or a long article called "What was post-socialism and what comes next?" We might do this as a way of discussing unexpected changes in governments with the rise of populist regimes and the transformation of what we might call liberal governmentality into something else. So, I might do that for a while but don't otherwise have a book project of my own in mind. To begin with, it always takes me a long time to go from one book to another, but more than that, I'm retiring next year and I may not do any more books. But, I'm sure I will become interested in some contemporary subject, so I might write a paper from time to time.

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